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How last winter could have actually been worse

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A convoy of snow-clearing equipment traveled down Harvard Street in Brookline in February, during one of last winter's numerous storms. Despite the record-breaking snow totals, take some solace: things (actually) could have been worse.

By Matt Rocheleau

GLOBE STAFF OCTOBER 27, 2015

Boston was frozen and buried like never before last winter when a rare merger of meteorological factors converged to deliver both record-setting cold and snow.

An estimated 1 billion cubic feet of snow was plowed from city streets, more than twice the volume of dirt that was moved during the 15-year Big Dig construction project, according to Rene Fielding, director of Boston's emergency management office.

Simultaneously, the city endured the most frigid February-March combination ever recorded, with an average temperature of 26.5 degrees, significantly more bitter than the next coldest, which was 29.9 degrees in 1967, according to Harvey Leonard, chief meteorologist at WCVB-TV (Channel 5).

“To be so cold and so far below average and yet still be snowy is about as narrow a fit as you could possibly have,” Leonard said, explaining that such cold weather is usually dry.

As unusual and brutal as last winter was, the situation — believe it or not — was also on the cusp of being much worse, experts explained this past weekend at the annual Southern New England Weather Conference held in Canton.



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Boston eluded at least three scenarios that could have had significant consequences:

- Had the first major snowstorm of the season, which hit Jan. 27, arrived just several hours earlier, flooding in coastal communities like Scituate would have been worse. Had it hit the week before, there could have been devastating floods in the city of Boston.

“We would have been in uncharted territory with impacts probably comparable with what New York City had with [Superstorm] Sandy,” Bob Thompson, meteorologist-in-charge of the National Weather Service forecast office in Taunton, said at Saturday’s conference. “We’ve dodged bullets over the last several years and this was one of them — where a relatively modest change in time could make a big difference.”

- The amount of precipitation that fell was actually about average. It was just so consistently bitter cold that the snow was light, piled up quickly, and had virtually no chance to melt between storms. Had the storms packed more moisture, snow accumulations could have been even higher.

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Last year, 65 inches of snow fell on Boston during the month of February alone, nearly 25 inches above the next highest total, and far above the monthly average of 13 inches, according to data from the National Weather Service.

But in terms of precipitation, just 3.37 inches fell, only a hair above the February average of 3.35 inches, the data shows.

- And, when the deep snow cover finally began to melt, the process was remarkably gradual, thanks to a slow rise in temperatures during the transition to spring. Meanwhile, the area saw springtime precipitation totals well below average.

Both factors prevented flooding, albeit by a small margin. Streamflows throughout the state hit levels above normal, but stayed just below their capacity.

“We had some really good conditions on our side,” Linda Hutchins, a hydrologist with the state Department of Conservation and Recreation, explained at the conference.

“Pretty much all the way through March it was below-normal cold,” she said. “In mid-April it did warm up, but we were still getting that diurnal fluctuation of above-freezing, below-freezing, above, below — so we actually ended up having a really nice melt that way.”

On the precipitation side, the area receives about 13 inches of rainfall on average from March through May, she explained, but we only got about 4 inches during that span.

“We were really lucky. That really helped.”

Most local residents do not consider themselves lucky to have witnessed the winter of 2015.

But for the winter-weary among us, there is some good news: the records set last winter should hold up for a long time, experts say.

Speaking about the records before more than 200 people at the meteorological conference that included a 9-year-old weather enthusiast, Thompson said: “My suspicion is that even the youngest who are here today may never see this broken.”

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